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# Reconceptualising inclusion as participation: Neoliberal buck-passing or strategic by-passing?

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# **Reconceptualising inclusion as participation: Neoliberal buck-passing or strategic by-passing?**

This paper investigates increases in the identification of special educational needs in the New South Wales (NSW) government school system over the last two decades, which are then discussed with senior public servants working within the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC). Participant narratives indicate deep structural barriers to inclusion that are perpetuated by the discourses and practices of regular and special education. Despite policies that speak of ‘working together’ for ‘every student’ and ‘every school’, students who experience difficulty in schools and with learning often remain peripheral to the main game, even though their number is said to be increasing. There is, however, some positive progress being made. Findings suggest that key policy figures within the NSW DEC are keenly aware of the barriers and have adopted alternative strategies to drive inclusion via a new discourse of ‘participation’ which is underpinned by the linking of student assessment and the resourcing of schools.

Keywords: inclusive education, curriculum, education policy, performance and accountability.

Word count: 9,781

## **Introduction**

Australia is often quite slow to engage with and adopt progressive social reforms. We have lagged behind contemporary powers on almost every important progressive social marker. For example, Australia famously followed New Zealand in granting women the right to vote by nine years (McAllister, 1997), maintained a segregationist race policy that rivalled apartheid until the early 1970s (Tavan, 2005), and persisted with the concept of ‘Terra Nullius’ until its rejection by the Australian High Court in 1992 (Ritter, 1996).<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, the Australian federal government has just succeeded in challenging the Legislative Marriage Equality (Same Sex) Act 2013, enacted by the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory (ACT)

government to ensure that marriage remains legal only between members of the opposite sex (Byrne, 2013). The new conservative Federal government has also recently dismantled policy frameworks designed to combat climate change, the Disability Discrimination Commissioner's appointment has been made redundant, and promised increases to education funding that would have provided much needed support for students with a disability have been shelved (Seccombe, 2014).

Against this historical and political backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising that some Australian education systems have remained largely resistant to the inclusive education movement. While there has been progress in some states, Australia's largest state of New South Wales (NSW) has maintained a conservative policy approach that has had relatively little impact on practice (Graham, 2015). This does not mean that policies and practices have remained unchanged or that there have been no attempts to do so by either the Department of Education or by schools and teachers themselves. On the contrary, there have been considerable changes over time however these have travelled both forward and back. This paper charts these developments and their impacts by first providing an historical overview to document changes in the educational provision and placement of students with disability over time. Trends are then examined via interviews conducted with senior public servants within the NSW Department of Education (DEC) to understand, from a policy perspective, which issues they perceive as presenting barriers to inclusion. In the third and final section, I describe how senior staff members within the Department have sought to circumvent these barriers in pragmatic and strategic ways.

## **Part I: Education for students with a disability in New South Wales**

Prior to the late 1800s, disabled children received little or no education and, if not

institutionalised, were often kept at home. Separate educational services were first offered by charities with the Royal Institute for Blind and Deaf Children building the first special schools in the 1860s. Government provision began with the establishment of Glenfield Park Special School in 1927 (Snow, 1990), however, the education of children with a disability was principally a private concern until government special schools and support classes gradually increased from the 1940s (Ladwig, Griffiths, Gore, & Lingard, 1999). Again slower to respond to social movements than the UK or USA, Australia only started embracing deinstitutionalisation in the 1960s (Young & Ashman, 2004), upon which the question of educational provision grew more urgent as special education was seen as a means to better support social integration. However, whilst special education began as a means to *include* children with a disability within education and society, separate and special provision began to *exclude* as increasing numbers of children and young people were deemed in need of ‘special’ instruction to be delivered in separate settings. As Doenau (1984) explains:

The period 1966 to 1976 was a time of particularly rapid increase in the number of separate special schools. Interestingly, it coincided with a marked increase in the Australian use of the term ‘integration’ and in the amount of serious exploration of the possibilities of reducing the role of segregated facilities. (p. 35)

Tensions arising from the paradox of excluding in order to include were apparent even then, prompting the Department to issue cautionary advice. With the limited number of separate special education support classes – then called ‘Opportunity Classes’<sup>2</sup> – growing to 40, school practitioners were advised to ensure that each class ‘feels that it is an important unit in the corporate life of the primary school in which it is housed’ and that ‘participation in school assemblies, in sport and in other general school activities is encouraged’ (Doenau, 1984, p. 50). In 1962, teachers in NSW were advised to take care with the language they used to avoid

‘inadvertent appellation’ whereby technical terms may ‘draw attention to individual children or embarrass them or which may be a cause of disturbance for parents’ (1984, p. 51).

For example, a child should never be designated, in his own hearing or the hearing of his fellows, as ‘backward’ ... Teachers should be constantly on their guard lest, even by an inadvertent appellation, a child or group of children be singled out as unusual. (Doenau, 1984, p. 51)

Despite such well-meaning rhetoric, progress was localised and spasmodic without support from a coherent policy framework underpinned by funding to enable the necessary physical, structural, attitudinal and pedagogical reforms. While increased funding to support the movement of students from separate to mainstream settings was recommended in the 1973 Karmel Report, the suggestion was muted and outcomes even more so. Two years later, the Commonwealth Schools Commission (CSC) stated that it supported ‘the general direction of the changes now emerging in special education in Australia’ and recommended that ‘children should not be segregated from their peers unless it can be established that this is necessary or that it provides educational advantages which will outweigh the disadvantages’ (Schools Commission Report, 1975, p. 240). The CSC went on to recommend additional funding to support the integration of students with disability into regular schools, albeit with a subtle reminder that this *included* students in support units/classes:

[The Commission] hopes that schools and systems for who funds are recommended will continue their efforts to place in ordinary schools an increasing number of children presently in special schools and units, and to support their presence with whatever special assistance is necessary and capable of being organised. (Schools Commission Report, 1975, p. 241)

Still, progress on the ground was relatively slow. As is often the case in Australia, developments overseas were the catalyst to policy change at a national level (Parmenter, 1979).

Legislation of the *1975 Education for all Handicapped Children Act* in the United States, and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* in 1978, together with the release of the highly influential *Warnock Report* in the United Kingdom, also in 1978, appeared to provide the stimulus that Australian governments needed. By 1982, a number of reports and studies contributed to a national policy consensus that every child should be able to attend their neighbourhood school where possible and in the best interests of the child (McRae, 1996).<sup>3</sup> Placement statistics would suggest the sentiment was quickly embraced for the number of students enrolled in government special schools across Australia dropped by 37% from 23,350 in 1982 to 14,768 in 1992 (De Lemos, 1994).

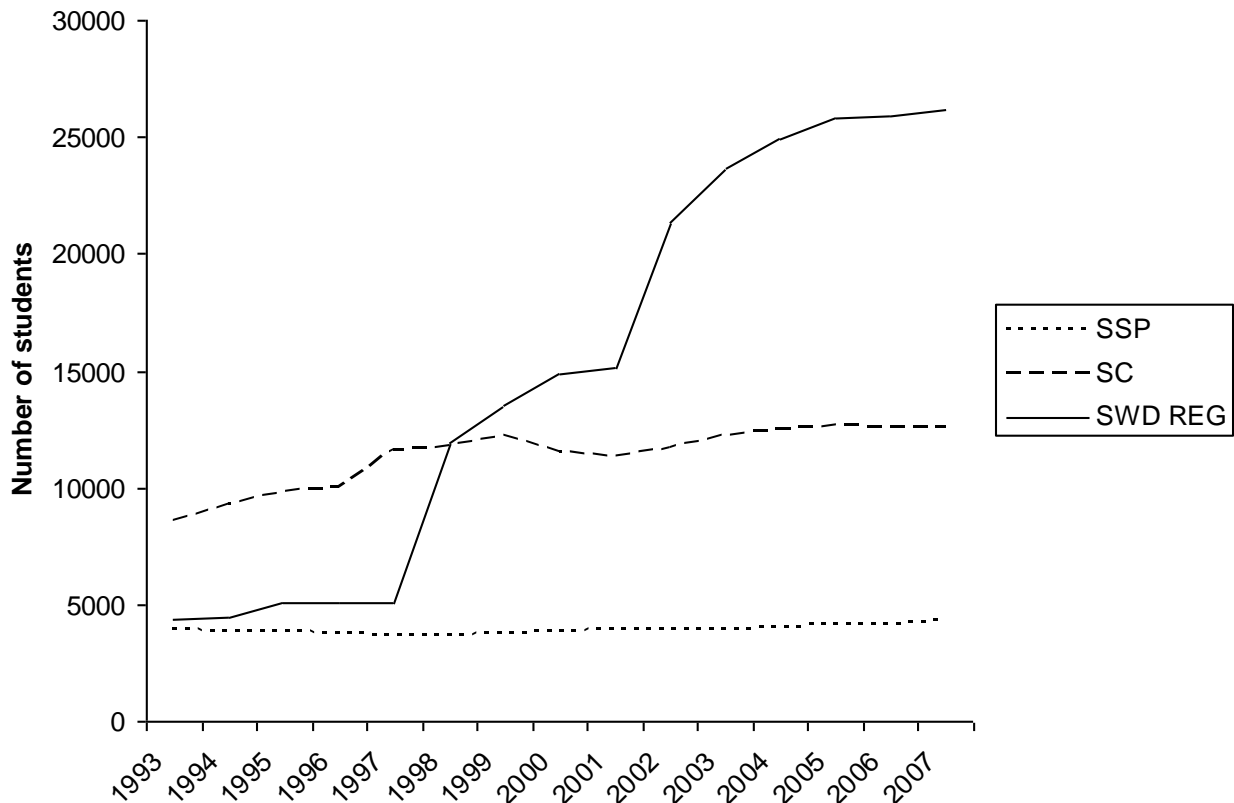
The Australian Federal Government continued to encourage what was then called ‘integration’ through a series of special grants in the early 1980s with the first of four explicit program aims being ‘movement of as many children as possible from special to regular schools’ (Doenau, 1984, p. 54). By 1984 however, the phrasing had changed to ‘the movement of handicapped children from *special schools/ classes* to *regular schools/ classes*’ (my emphasis, 1984, p. 54) in an effort to discourage the transfer of children with a disability from separate special schools to separate special classes housed within mainstream schools. While this was a sensible amendment, it did not appear to have much influence on the ground. The *1996 McRae Inclusion/Integration Feasibility Study* found that there was a 30% decrease in government special school enrolments in NSW between 1985 and 1995 but also that there had been a corresponding rise of enrolments in separate support classes, which were said to be acting as ‘surrogate’ special schools within ‘mainstream’ school campuses (McRae, 1996, p. 23). Also of concern were newly emerging trends that pointed to increased identification within particular categories of disability. Implicating shifts in funding policy as opposed to changes in incidence,

McRae (1996) pointed to large and sudden increases in the number of students classified as disabled in NSW government schools. For example, between 1994 and 1995, the ‘identification of students with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities rose 4.8% and 8.1% respectively, and behaviour disorders rose 33.4%’ (1996, p. 24). McRae (1996) also found inequity in the provision of support services on a geographic basis, as well as disparities relating to gender, age and disability type.

Recent research finds that these trends in identification and placement have accelerated rather than abated (Graham & Sweller, 2011). Between 1997 and 2007, the percentage of students with a confirmed disability in NSW government schools more than doubled, rising from 2.7% to 6.7% of total enrolments (2011). The largest increase was in the number of students enrolled in regular classes in mainstream schools (see Figure 1 below). Taken alone, this might suggest that the move to include met with considerable success in NSW; however, prior research has found that the majority of students receiving the poorly titled ‘integration funding’ are those who tend to be ‘enrolled in regular classes regardless of the supports available’ (Dempsey & Foreman, 1997, p. 214; Dempsey, 2007). Various stakeholders still point to these statistics to attest to the impact of ‘integration’ (see, for example, AEU, 2010; NSW Parliamentary Inquiry, 2010), however, longitudinal analyses of student enrolment data reveal an overall *increase* in the number of students attending school in separate special educational settings, together with a decrease in the number of students enrolled in the mainstream (Sweller, Graham, & Van Bergen, 2012). In other words, increases in special school and support class enrolments is not a result of growth in the student population, as total enrolments in NSW government schools declined by 3.5% over the same time period (Graham & Sweller, 2011).



Figure 1: Number of students enrolled in special schools (SSPs), support classes (SCs) and the number of students with disabilities in regular classes (SWD REG) from 1993 to 2007 (Graham & Sweller, 2011)



These trends are not unlike those noted by Croll and Moses (2003) in the UK who found that substantial increases in the reported level of special educational needs in England between 1981 and 1998 could *not* be accounted for by movement from special to mainstream settings. While they did note that there had been some progress on that front, overall it was ‘slow and uneven, and the number of children involved is only a very small percentage of children with special needs in mainstream schools’ (Croll & Moses, 2003, p. 736). Growth in the number of students with special educational needs in England was therefore being driven by increased identification of students who were already attending their local school and not because significant numbers of disabled students were transferring from special to inclusive settings. Key

stakeholders argue that increased identification are simply an indication that diagnostic practices have improved and/or developments in neonatal and paediatric health care have resulted in higher neonatal survival rates (NSW Parliamentary Inquiry, 2010; Graham, 2015), however, such theories fail to explain why identification rates in the traditionally normative categories of disability have slowed,<sup>4</sup> while those in non-normative categories continue to rise (Greene & Forster, 2002). This means that ‘low-incidence’ disabilities (hearing, vision, physical, and intellectual impairment) have tended to remain steady or have decreased, whereas ‘high-incidence’ disabilities (sometimes called ‘soft’ or ‘judgmental’ diagnoses) have increased. These diagnostic categories represent children who are described as having social, emotional, behavioural and mild learning difficulties (Tomlinson, 1982).

### **The study**

To better understand what might be driving these trends, interviews were conducted with six senior public servants within the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) who are responsible for developing and implementing policies across a range of portfolios in the NSW government school sector (see Table 1 below). These interviews formed part of a larger empirical study investigating the increased identification of special educational needs in NSW government schools (ARC Discovery Project DP1093020). During the interview, participants were asked to comment on the increased identification and exclusion of students with a disability in NSW government schools. Open-ended prompts were issued to encourage participants to discuss potential factors of influence and what they believed was happening overall. The interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. Sub-themes were established through an open-coding process and grouped using the axial coding technique into conceptual fields or meta-themes (Miles & Huberman, 1983).

Table 1: List of participants and codes

<b>Participant Code</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>
C1	Senior Executive, Disability Programs
C2	Senior Policy Officer, Disability Programs
C3	Senior Executive, Planning & Innovation
C4	Senior Executive, Office of the Director-General
C5	Senior Executive, Student Welfare
C6	Senior Executive, Student Engagement & Program Evaluation

As an analysis of the factors perceived to be influencing the increased identification of special educational needs in NSW has been published elsewhere (Graham, 2015), this paper focuses on the perceived barriers to inclusion from the perspective of this group of six senior public servants. Their accounts suggest that despite impassioned and well-meaning advocacy for children with additional support needs within pockets of the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC), particularly within Disability Programs Directorate, deep political and structural barriers to inclusion exist both within and outside the Department. The narratives of these key policy actors reveal that these barriers share deep historical, philosophical and ideological roots, and are therefore enmeshed deep within the culture of the entire organisation; one that is influenced by DEC's size and structure. The impact of DEC's size and structure on this study and the silo-mentalities they produce is discussed in part two.

## **Part II: Wrestling an 800 lb gorilla ...**

The NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) prides itself on being the largest education system in the southern hemisphere with over 750,000 students from preschool to year 12 (ABS, 2013). NSW government schools enrol one in five Australian school students (20.8%) and just under two-thirds (65.4%) of all school-aged children in NSW (2013). DEC's size confers significant political advantage nationally with NSW enjoying considerable influence in

educational debates and policy development; however, it also presents operational challenges that can work against reforms requiring deep pedagogical and attitudinal change. Until a recent down-sizing under the O'Farrell Liberal state government, the NSW government school system has been highly centralised with one Director General and six Deputy Director-Generals overseeing numerous General Managers, each with portfolios housing several Directorates (see Figure 1, Appendix).

For example, as of 2010 when this ARC project began, the Schools Portfolio comprised 10 regional Directors spread across the state, alongside two General Managers (Learning & Development Branch, and Access & Equity Branch) each with oversight for four and five Directorates respectively. Reporting to the 10 regional directors were 78 School Education Directors with oversight for over 2200 school principals and some 60,000 FTE teachers. While this structure was loftily described by one Director in DEC Central Office as the 'chain of command, tower of response' (C1), in truth DEC's size and scale presents problems in terms of policy communication and enactment both within and outside DEC Central. For example, one issue affecting DEC's bid to include students with additional support needs is that its size and scale perpetuates silo-mentalities that are already informed by assumptions about disability in the general community. This first became apparent during the recruitment phase for this project. In the following section, I describe how this played out and the impacts of silo thinking on the Department's attempt to develop an education system that is responsive to student diversity.

### ***Silos and exiles***

As a specific objective of this project was to better understand the complex operational realities of developing policies and changing practice across a large and diverse geographical context, participants were initially sought from relevant DEC portfolios across the entire organisation,

including Workforce Management & Systems Improvement, Strategic Planning & Regulation, and the Schools Portfolio. Staff members from numerous Directorates within each Portfolio were invited to participate. In the Schools Portfolio, for example, these included Disability Programs Directorate, Educational Measurement & School Accountability Directorate, Curriculum Directorate, Professional Learning & Development Directorate, and Student Welfare Directorate. Of these, only staff from Disability Programs and Student Welfare Directorate agreed to participate. All others declined.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the most common reason offered – at both Portfolio and Directorate level – was lack of relevant expertise, together (in most cases) with a recommendation that the researcher seek input from the Director of Disability Programs. This response occurred even though the project information statement clearly stated that this was to be a systems analysis aimed at understanding the rationale behind shifts in education policy, which:

... requires the input of all those responsible for its development. Education departments are large and complex organisations with many directorates and administrative regions, each charged with specific responsibilities to be executed across a diverse range of contexts. In seeking to understand the increase in the number of students with a diagnosis of disability eligible for support in New South Wales government schools, it is important to gain the perspectives of policy/decision makers with responsibilities that may have some bearing on the issue. (Project Information Statement, Graham, 2010–2012)

One staff member from Student Engagement and Program Evaluation Bureau who agreed to participate explained that onward referrals to the Director of Disability Programs were most likely an endorsement of his expertise and ‘a kind of artefact in the way the Department’s organised’ (C6). This view was only partly shared by participants within Disability Programs Directorate, some of whom reported the existence of a strong silo-mentality within the Department which they believed unnecessarily complicated their work and required them to fight for the representation of students with additional support needs. This silo-mentality was

described in a number of different ways, in relation to a number of different situations, and appeared to be influenced by a number of factors including the size of the organisation, the inherited nature of Departmental structures and policy legacies, as well as assumptions about disability and ‘children with special needs’ more generally. This is not to say that Disability Programs staff were the only participants who noted these issues, simply that they tended to be more critical and explicit in their analysis and articulation of them. Indeed, as one participant noted, the Department is keenly aware that silos exist – between DEC and other government departments, between DEC Directorates, between schools and DEC, between regular and special settings, between schools, and between schools and parents – and has implemented an initiative aimed at countering the problem.

So we’re trying to do some really exciting work at the moment ... we’re sort of calling it ‘Working Together’, and it’s this real grappling with the idea, as an organisation – this is something that will actually impinge on the whole organisation, not just schools, because, quite clearly, ‘Working Together’ is about everybody working together! So it’s about the relationships that you have with other members of other directorates. What does it mean? How do parents work with schools? How do schools work with parents? How does an organisation like ours work with other government agencies? How do other government agencies interact with us? What does it mean for non-government providers that are doing work that we need to rely on as well? ... [It] will really set a big umbrella that other policies and other directions in procedure should reflect that level of understanding. So that’s a big shift, but it’s also a big piece of work that needs to be done, because I think what underpins all of this is people’s own attitudes and beliefs... (C2)

Peoples’ attitudes and beliefs both present and sustain barriers and, according to one senior public servant in Disability Programs, the academic school curriculum is one such barrier.

We've got a linear curriculum or a ladder curriculum that's lockstep and it's got a C standard as the benchmarks of progression along that continuum. That's problematic, because there are lots of kids that are outliers. (C1)

Staff within Disability Programs however report that they find it difficult to influence broader issues relating to school education, such as the academic school curriculum, both because they are seen as *experts* (of 'special' students) and as *non-experts* (of curriculum), and because of prevailing assumptions about students with 'special needs' in the broader community. A senior policy officer within Disability Programs Directorate (DPD) was particularly passionate about this issue, explaining that DPD is engaging with the 'Working Together' initiative in an energetic fashion because they realise that the achievement of an inclusive education system requires them to make meaningful impact *beyond* administrative boundaries. His recount of the communicative difficulties between DPD and other Directorates within the Schools Portfolio sheds some light on why inclusive education appears to have had relatively less impact in NSW compared to some other states in Australia and some jurisdictions overseas (see Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011; Chong, 2013). According to C2, attitudes and beliefs about 'special people' for 'special students' are endemic but particularly strong within Curriculum Directorate, where the concept of the 'average' student informs curriculum development and planning.

We have some ding-dong arguments with them, and it surprises me that that's the reality of it! And, you know, one of our officers was at a meeting the other day. We were talking about kids with a significant level of need, but someone in [Curriculum] directorate said, 'That's alright, because a specialist will come in and support the teacher' and we're thinking ... 'What colour cape do *they* wear?!' Because, you know, there *isn't* one! (C2)

A senior public servant in the Strategic Planning and Regulation Portfolio also acknowledged the existence of silos between education sub-disciplines and corresponding

Department directorates. When I noted during our interview that Strategic Planning was one of only two ‘other’ directorates to accept my invitation to participate in this study and that most other directorates had redirected me to the Director of Disability Programs, C3 also referred to respect for his expertise. Her concluding comment is revealing however:

Curriculum is for all students! But to try to be fair to that response... they’re probably thinking, he’s in charge of the equity programs ... They do tend to hold him as being expert in all things to do with [students with additional support needs] and forget that the work they’re doing is actually about those children too. (C3)

Forgetting that the work that takes place in Curriculum Directorate is ‘about those children too’ is hugely problematic and has the potential to create significant problems for teachers, which then revisit the Department, albeit via Disability Programs or Student Welfare Directorate. As discussed in the previous section, increases in the classification of students with special educational needs over the last 20 years in the NSW government school sector have occurred principally amongst students attending regular classes within mainstream schools. There are two important inter-related points to be made here. Firstly, this increase represents students who will be taught by regular classroom teachers with general education degrees who will be required to differentiate the curriculum for *all* the children in their class. Secondly, accompanying this increase has been a significant rise in the demand for teacher aides and in the use of separate special educational settings, much of which has been attributed – rightly or wrongly – to the ‘poor preparation’ of regular classroom teachers by universities. Complex problems have complex origins and while the knowledge, capacity and attitudes of policy makers and school practitioners do play a role (Graham, 2015), so too do the perverse incentives created by categorical support allocation models (see Pijl, this issue), standardised assessment accountability frameworks, and school markets.



DEC is well aware of these increases in identification and has attempted to address perceived drivers by introducing a new policy called ‘Every Student, Every School’ (ESES) which incorporates census-based funding with a learning support staff resource in every school according to school size, student assessment data, and demography.<sup>6</sup> The new program aims to take the heat out of a categorical or ‘bounty’ funding system (Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011) that C1 said he had ‘a real problem with’:

... it’s a cargo cult: beating the bush to find kids that are going to bring you money to the school, do you know what I mean? ... So this system stops that too, to some extent, the kids at the lower level: we give you the money but *you*’ve got to make a decision about the money. That’s much harder than ‘Oh, this kid looks different, let’s go and get him diagnosed so I can get a thousand dollars and so another thousand dollars, another thousand dollars, another thousand dollars.’ You know what I mean? (C1)

ESES draws on a similar conceptual framework to Response to Intervention (RTI), where the ‘first line of defence’ (C1) in supporting students with a disability, learning or behavioural difficulties is through adjustments and accommodations by the classroom teacher with support from the Learning Support Coordinator, and other specialist staff, including the school counsellor. Whilst ESES was opposed by the NSW Teachers Federation and some parent lobby groups, this new policy platform aims to decouple the provision of learning support from diagnostic categories, which is an important step towards reducing perverse incentives and costs, improving efficiency and, ultimately, student outcomes. *If*, however, teachers are not being adequately supported by curriculum writers and/or developers who fail to understand the diversity of the ‘average’ classroom and who therefore produce documents and materials that complicate rather than ease modification, then teachers will continue to demand support on the

ground; support which requires additional funding and which therefore requires the identification and classification of ‘special’ educational needs.

According to a senior policy officer within Disability Programs Directorate (DPD), when it comes to students with additional support needs, silo-thinking is endemic across the system, including on the ground in schools. When discussing some of the barriers DPD staff experience, C2 referred back to the difficulty that I found when recruiting participants from other DEC Directorates to contextualise and explain the point he was making in relation to broader assumptions about disability:

I think this highlights what you just found in trying to move this research with other offices in our organisation – ‘Oh, it’s disability, so you better go and talk to [the Director of Disability Programs].’ And we get that all of the time, so if there’s an issue in the school, and it just so happens that it involves a young person with a disability ‘Oh, you better ring the Disability Program Consultant’ even though it might be a health care issue, or a curriculum issue... So the focus is on the child’s disability, not on ‘What’s the actual underlying issue here?’ (C2)

The barriers between Disability Programs and other Directorates are not natural barriers. Nor are the barriers erected by lay assumptions about dis/ability and which expert is responsible for which children. Rather, these barriers reflect human decisions that define bodies of knowledge and fields of expertise, which Foucault (1972) argues are constructed through the use of specific and technical discourses that delimit *who* those fields are about – in this case, ‘regular’ or ‘special children’ – and who is qualified to treat (or teach) them. While the ‘psy-sciences’ feature large in Foucault’s writings, the fields of ‘general’ and ‘special’ education are modern exemplars. Although the boundaries between these fields have become more blurred since the deinstitutionalisation, integration and inclusion movements (Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011), the concept of a ‘general’ education and a curriculum for the ‘average’ child persists. So

too, therefore, does a parallel special education system that is designed to plug the gaps left by normative thinking. Until that thinking changes however and until principals, classroom teachers, and curriculum and assessment developers realise that diversity *is* actually the norm (Graham, 2006) then this pattern is set to repeat itself over and over again. This was clear to C2, who believed that many of the barriers facing students with additional support requirements are simply reinforced by silos:

And in an ideal world, a directorate like this shouldn't have to exist, because it would be inbuilt into the philosophy or the understanding around how everyone does their work. So it's a historical thing where, 'Oh, that person's special, so there must be special people who look after those!' (C2)

***On external challenges and the opportunities they present...***

Further reinforcing the margins that consign students with a disability to the periphery are external drivers such as the Australian Federal government's *National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN), and the OECD's *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA). While NSW pioneered student performance as school accountability in Australia with the Basic Skills Test (BST) during the 1990s, the BST was first and foremost a diagnostic tool for use within schools and the results were not made public. A certain amount of gaming still occurred, however, as school-based data analysis and professional development inevitably focussed on which questions children routinely got wrong and which, therefore, did they need to 'get right' in order to lift the school's performance. NAPLAN, which was introduced by the Federal government in 2008, has intensified the pressure enormously because not only are government schools across NSW compared with each other but, since the launch of the Federal government's *My School* website in 2010, government and non-government schools

across all Australian states and territories are compared on the basis of the achievement of students in Years three, five, seven and nine.

The introduction of *My School*, which was described by the then Federal Education Minister, Peter Garrett, as a ‘game changer’, has resulted in gaming both at the *school level* – with some parents being encouraged to apply for disability provisions/exemptions or to keep their children home during NAPLAN testing – and the *state level* with some states exempting far higher percentages of students than other states (Davies, 2012). However, given their long experience with the Basic Skills Test and prior experiments in linking student performance to school resourcing (see Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011), this was something for which DEC was prepared and towards which they have taken a principled approach. This was by no means an endorsement of NAPLAN as participants were quite critical of the program, particularly as it is not a useful diagnostic tool for teachers, nor is it accessible to students with severe disability (Elliott, Davies, & Kettler, 2012). Yet, despite its problems NAPLAN does appear – however paradoxically – to have presented NSW DEC with a means to circumvent the rabbit hole created by the discourses of ‘general’, ‘special’, and even ‘inclusive’ education. In the final section of this paper, I describe the strategies that these six senior public servants have deployed to reconceptualise and drive what might be perceived as *inclusion as participation* in NSW government schools.

### **Part III: Reconceptualising inclusion as participation?**

NSW has consistently achieved the highest NAPLAN participation rate of all Australian states and territories (97.3% in 2013) since national assessment began in 2008 and this is an achievement of which C1, a senior public servant in Disability Programs Directorate, is proud. For example, it is telling that in an interview transcript totalling almost 14,000 words that

focused on questions to do with students with disability and inclusive education, C1 used the term ‘inclusion’ only once and only then to invoke this new concept of ‘participation’:

NSW repeatedly demonstrates that in the broadest range of inclusion, we’ve actually elevated our results to a very high level. You know, in Northern Territory last year, 6% of kids didn’t sit NAPLAN. Now, six percent! (C1)

The way in which ‘participation’ was discussed across the six interviews, however, suggests that the concept is imbued with deeper meaning and purpose beyond performance measurement. If anything, DEC’s discourse of participation appears to have supplanted the much-maligned discourse of inclusion, perhaps because DEC realises that they lost the battle on that front a long time ago (Graham, 2015; Graham & Spandagou, 2011). Although this retreat from the hard work of developing inclusive practices in favour of accountability mechanisms that attempt to steer from a distance could be discounted as a form of neoliberal ‘buckpassing’, these six public servants genuinely seemed to be looking for solutions that amount to the same end. Ultimately, DEC appears to perceive participation in NAPLAN as a medium through which to anchor access and participation in the curriculum and to further promote what C1 calls ‘meaningful, rigorous and dignified learning’. Whilst this approach has been hampered by NAPLAN’s lack of accessibility (Elliott et al., 2012), it is important to remember that NSW exempts only 2.7% of students, a number that is approximately equivalent to enrolments in special schools and support classes. As a far higher number have been identified as having special educational needs in regular classes, a key consideration for the Department is the differentiation of mainstream curriculum and pedagogy to ensure greater access and participation for this group of students.

Ironically, this is also the group for which there has been the most pressure to diagnose and refer to special educational settings; pressure that has significantly increased since NAPLAN results began to be reported and compared on the *My School* website. To their credit, DEC is aware of these pressures and is actively trying to minimise them whilst keeping their focus on the ‘main game’: quality teaching and learning for *all* students.

... teachers can be given wonderful things in their pre-service training and it can be washed out within months of going into a school that doesn’t have a philosophy, a culture, an entity that aligns with that and so you do get that sort of stuff. So it’s about leadership, it’s about school culture, it’s about professionalism in schools, it’s about expectations of standards – you know, all of this sort of research that comes from what we now know more about in terms of effective schools research and stuff absolutely applies. So what are the mechanisms systems have to adjust that? Well, the smaller the system, the easier it is to have traction on many of those things, but the larger and more complex the system is, the more challenging it will be. (C1)

According to C1, the Department is constantly reshaping the system ‘to get traction’, particularly in relation to what he calls ‘kids in the grey zone’. These are students who require additional support for learning but who do not have a confirmed disability within the categories eligible for targeted individual funding support. Rather, these are students who would benefit from adjustments in pedagogy and curriculum modifications but whose classroom teacher may not have the requisite skills, confidence or knowledge. ‘Every Student, Every School’ was therefore designed to build the capacity of classroom teachers by, as C1 put it, resourcing schools with ‘somebody on the ground [to provide] those schools with more insight than what might be there’. According to C1, this increased focus on ‘kids in the grey zone’ was a direct result of successive PISA and NAPLAN data analyses, which highlighted the presence of a ‘long tail’ in student performance:

Yeah, so ... we've taken on board the tail, we've been aware of it, we've put a lot, a *lot* of resource and energy into it as a system of trying to elevate people's understanding, knowledge and capacity to respond to the ... the value-adding and participation of kids. (C1)

DEC has made concerted efforts, over the last 10 years in particular, to refocus attention on this group in a bid to increase their participation in the curriculum and to address practices that lead to their exclusion, such as the lack of differentiation and inappropriate use of teacher aides (Graham, 2015). Participation of as many students as possible in assessment accountability frameworks – such as NAPLAN – is therefore perceived by these senior public servants as a means to force schools to engage with and take responsibility for these students' learning.

### *Assessment for all?*

Although the question 'Into what do we seek to include?' posed by Graham and Slee (2008) is pertinent here, experts from the US have long advocated the inclusion of students with disability in standards-based accountability frameworks. McLaughlin and Rhim (2007), for example, conducted a review of 10 years of research and found that that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and its predecessors had made a positive contribution by increasing the visibility and participation of students with disability within US education systems.

We believe it has also driven an increase in the level of inclusion—at least 'placement-defined' inclusion – that was not seen prior to implementation of these frameworks. We think that some evidence of increased levels of academic performance among children with disabilities is emerging that supports the goal of increased educational opportunity (McLaughlin & Rhim, 2007, p. 37).

Granted, there are dangers involved because such strategies can work to concentrate resources and attention on the students perceived to have the potential to capitalise on the

supports provided and thereby help to improve a school's performance by achieving a higher benchmark. Such practices of 'educational triage' (Gillborn & Youdell, 1999) can also work to detract focus from students whose potential may not be so positively perceived, skewing support in favour of those deemed most likely to get over the minimum benchmark or, in the case of NCLB, to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Research from the United States initially pointed to significant increases in the identification of disability in the early years of NCLB as schools scrambled to exempt students with learning and behavioural difficulties (McLeskey, Hoppey, Williamson, & Rentz, 2004). Tougher exemption criteria also contributed to increased exclusion in some US states (Figlio & Getzler, 2006), as students with learning and behavioural difficulties began to spend increased time in resource rooms in an effort to provide more intensive instruction in preparation for the tests (Wappett, 2009).

Over time, however, these trends appear to have eased and three inter-related factors are considered to have been of influence (see Danforth, this issue). First, the US Federal Department of Education ordered states to disaggregate NCLB achievement data by race, ethnicity, low income status, English language learner status, and disability to enable determination of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) by *sub-group*. Second, the US Federal Department of Education required the states to ensure that *each* of these sub-groups achieve 100% proficiency over time. Third, in order to meet these targets, school administrators began to realise that access to high quality curriculum and instruction was necessary to promote improvements in the academic achievement of students with disability. According to Scot Danforth (this issue), these three factors have helped to drive a 53% increase in the percentage of disabled students being educated in general education classrooms between 1992 and 2011 in the United States.



Senior public servants within DEC are not blind to the perverse and sometimes exclusionary effects of tying student performance in standardised assessments to school accountability measures and have endeavoured to ensure that as many of their students as practicably possible are included in NAPLAN.<sup>7</sup> The reasoning behind this push is that schools' will begin to focus more on these students' learning *if* their achievement stands to affect the school's NAPLAN results and *if* disincentives are put in place to discourage their exclusion. It is important to note that this drive to include as many students as practically possible in NAPLAN is occurring even though senior public servants are aware that increased participation may result either in NSW being compared unfavourably to other states (some of which exclude much higher percentages of low-achieving students) and/or depress cohort results in the short term. For example, effects that resulted from increasing the participation of Indigenous students were described to me by C4, as an example how increased participation can skew performance data:

... you've got to be really careful with data. Little small school, one of our small schools ... and it was mainly Aboriginal children in this primary school – and they were recording literacy performance and school attendance – and the points kept going up, and up, and up, it was going really well – then one particular year: whack. Down it came! Now, if you didn't look at the attendance data, you'd make the wrong conclusion. What had been happening had been that a number of Aboriginal children in the community hadn't been attending regularly. Or their attendance was relatively low. So this particular year they made a very strong drive to increase the participation rate. Now, naturally, that then led to a dropping of the graph, because you now had kids at school – thank god – who actually had been not at school so much before, and therefore their results were now showing up in the literacy data. And the way to look at that data would be to say, 'Well, actually, yes, the literacy's down across the whole cohort, but the whole cohort's now broader, and you look in a few years' time, if they can maintain that high participation rate, high attendance rate, the cohort will continue to rise.' So that's just an example of what I'm saying ...

Appearing to do more poorly than other states was thus noted as a potential side-effect of DEC's 'participation' drive, however, this acknowledgement was coupled with a deep sense of pride that NSW at least was doing the right thing and not gaming the system by excluding the tail.

NSW is always in the game of league tables against the other states. We're up for that anytime, because we usually look pretty good! And we know Victoria cheats to get where it is! (C3)

... Queensland's got a similar sort of problem ... It's got a lower level of performance overall but a higher exclusion rate of kids that don't do it, so it's testing a smaller group of kids, a smaller subset of kids. That's what this stuff doesn't drill down into: comparisons between member states, what you've actually included and what you haven't. Now when you go to... some of these countries, particularly the Asian ones in particular, particularly Japan, there'll be a huge exclusion of kids that are lower-performing. You know, Korea for example, is a country that excludes a whole lot of kids, 'sub-normal' kids. They've got categories of 'sub-normal'. Well, you know, where's the line drawn in their population demographic for sub-normality? (C1)

### ***What matters more: The means or the end?***

Inclusion as participation in the curriculum and standardised assessment may not tick the right ideological boxes for some because it remains agnostic about questions of placement and ignores deeper questions about practices that reinforce the concept of a mainstream, such as the accessibility of that curriculum and the attitudes of teachers. Nonetheless, in NSW, the constant drive to increase participation in learning through participation in student assessment accountability frameworks is underpinned by deep and impassioned beliefs about the learning entitlement and rights of students with disability.

NSW had the highest [NAPLAN] participation rates, and have still got the highest participation rates of any jurisdiction. A lot of that work is work that was done by C1 and myself and negotiating what happened in terms of special provisions, and convincing people it's a damn good thing for those kids to do it! (C6)

Whilst DEC's new concept and discourse of participation might be perceived by some as inclusion by stealth or a form of neoliberal buckpassing – perhaps because of the view that they haven't tried hard or long enough to make inclusion work – the intention of the public servants who are responsible for developing and implementing policies in the disability, student engagement/welfare, and strategic planning space is to use NAPLAN to make these students visible and to ensure that schools are held accountable for their learning. Participation in NAPLAN therefore appears to be a strategic means to bypass the barriers to inclusion that were noted earlier (at both school and department levels), rather than giving up on the project entirely.

According to participants within DEC Central, the achievement of the highest NAPLAN participation rate nationally was the result of pulling two strategic 'levers'. The first was to require schools to obtain the written permission of parents before NAPLAN disability support provisions or exemptions can be made. There are, of course, ways that this can be manipulated, as media reports about parents being asked to keep their child at home attest.<sup>8</sup> The second lever, which was designed to support the first, was to tie ESES funding allocations to NAPLAN results. A public servant in Strategic Planning Directorate, described this as 'a bit of a lever to keep schools engaged in the testing' (C3), a strategy that was reiterated by C6 in Student Engagement and Evaluation Bureau.

Despite what's happening in NAPLAN and how it has all become a little bit more high stakes, our allocation of those support teachers is on the back of the results. Resources are allocated where the need is apparent, so there's really no win for a school to withdraw its

kids, because it's going to be masking difficulties that actually need to be resourced to be addressed. (C3)

... if you want teacher support in NSW, you don't tell the kids who are going to win that support to stay at home! (C6)

Whilst this new discourse of participation may not be apparent in publicly available policy statements (many of which still use the term 'integration') or in the Department's maintenance of a growing network of separate special educational settings (all of which runs counter to inclusive education philosophy), the public face of an organisation does not necessarily reflect the political struggles within. Policy documents present only a partial view and it is important to remember that such documents are heteroglossic and the result of much political contest (Taylor & Singh, 2005). As Stephen Ball's (1997) work makes clear, point-in-time statements that are fixed in text do not necessarily represent the day-to-day decisions that enact policy and therefore bring it to life. Such policy work also may not be visible to researchers as it occurs behind the scenes in negotiations that take place across all levels of the organisation and in the manipulation of 'levers' that may appear insignificant and go quietly unnoticed but which have multiplier effects. These effects take time to make their way through the system and will only be discernible in the form of increases in student performance at the lower end or decreases in special education placement or early school leaving much further down the track. We may also find that these strategies end up having little impact beyond increased participation in NAPLAN, leaving attitudes and assumptions about students who experience difficulty in schools and with learning firmly in place. At this point therefore, whilst it seems that there has been some positive progress in NSW in recent years and that DEC is actively pushing for better outcomes for students with disabilities and learning difficulties, the question remains as to

whether these levers can surmount the practical problems presented by silo-mentalities in the broader educational community and the challenges on the ground that result.

## **Conclusion**

While there is little evidence of the discourse of inclusion in DEC policy documents<sup>9</sup> and considerable evidence of silo-thinking when it comes to students who experience difficulty in schools and with learning, there *is* strong support within the Department for a broader form of inclusion; that of student ‘participation’. Although it is dangerously linked to technocratic ideas that view education as ‘a data administration system where increased test scores are synonymous with improved teaching and learning’ (Danforth, this issue), this new discourse of *participation* may have more potential to bring about change than the now contested concept of ‘inclusion’. This is because the concept of participation decentres in a way that inclusion does not (see Graham & Slee, 2008), and it is not yet associated with disability in the way that inclusion has been (Taylor & Singh, 2005). In adopting a new discourse of participation and by manipulating the parameters to engineer outcomes that are of benefit to students who are often victims of accountability frameworks, the NSW government school sector may have found a way of brokering cooperation between silos towards a common end. While their substitution of the discourse of inclusion with a discourse of participation may be perceived as neoliberal buck-passing by some, this move does at least appear to enjoy consensus support. Whether DEC’s participation agenda is really a strategy to by-pass the barriers to inclusion and whether it is successful in the long term or not, early indicators suggest that DEC is now demonstrating integrity and strategic leadership in an area where commitment has been lacking for some time.

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- 1 'Terra Nullius' means empty or undiscovered land. European 'settlement' was justified on this basis, negating 40,000 years of habitation by Indigenous peoples, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.
  - 2 The term now refers to academically-selective classes offered in Years five and six in selected government primary schools across the state. Separate classes for children with a disability are called 'support classes'. There are now over 2000 separate support classes across the state of NSW.
  - 3 Although education is a state responsibility in Australia, the development of national legislative frameworks including the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Act in 1986, the Disability Discrimination Act in 1992, and the Disability Standards for Education in 2005 have contributed towards state compliance in the education of students with disabilities.
  - 4 Normative disabilities are those that few can or would argue with as requiring additional support or adapted instruction: severe intellectual impairment, cerebral palsy, classic autism, and vision and hearing impairment. The non-normative category describes subjective categories that rely upon professional judgement (Tomlinson, 1982). Farran and Shonkoff (1994) argue that these many of these children have acquired 'disabilities' due to negative and repeated 'experiences of failure in their early encounters with the educational system' (p. 148).
  - 5 NSW was the only system in which this response was received in Pei Wen Chong's international comparison of NSW, Malaysia, Scotland and Finland (see Chong, 2013).
  - 6 While the policy attempts to move away from categorical based funding in the main, the 'Integration Funding Support' program remains in place for students with a confirmed disability and high support needs.

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- 7 See Elliott, Davies and Kettler (2012) for a discussion of NAPLAN's lack of accessibility for students with disability and the lessons to be learned about the benefits of inclusive assessment from the United States.
- 8 While there has been a national decline in participation rates since NAPLAN testing began in 2008, NSW still has the highest participation rate.
- 9 NSW is not the only government school system that has expressed reservations about the language of 'inclusion'. The term has been avoided by other Departments of Education within Australia 'because of its association with disabilities' (Taylor & Singh, 2005). Public servants in QLD also preferred to focus on 'diversity' and 'equity' to avoid singling out students with disability.